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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000535

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SUBJECT: MORE FRACTURES IN THE UNITED FRONT

REF: A. KABUL 471
[1](#)B. 08 KABUL 2913
[1](#)C. KABUL 244
[1](#)D. KABUL 432

Classified By: Acting PolCouns Stacy Nichols for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The opposition United Front coalition has faced a series of setbacks in recent weeks jeopardizing the group's unity and its plans to defeat Karzai in this year's presidential election. Karzai has remained one step ahead of his chief rivals through a handful of savvy political maneuvers made even more effective by the UF's own blunders. Three chief factors have exposed disunity within the UF ranks: (1) Karzai's election date decree; (2) competition for the UF's presidential endorsement; and (3) Karzai's calculated outreach to certain UF members. It now appears unlikely that the mostly non-Pashtun UF would be able to defeat Karzai alone) they would require support from the other major (mostly Pashtun) political leaders and presidential candidates. However, entering into such alliances would only make the task of finding a consensus opposition candidate more difficult and create more openings for Karzai to exploit intra-coalition differences.

Election Decree Surprises UF

[1](#)2. (C) Karzai's 2/28 decree calling for the Independent Election Commission to set an election date "in accordance with the Constitution" scared many into believing the president would attempt to move the election date up to April (ref A). The decree forced UF leaders, knowing they could not win a snap election, to come out in support of the IEC's 8/20 election date, even though many UF members had once criticized that date as "unconstitutional." Intending to support the 8/20 date all along, Karzai's deft play forced the opposition's hand and neutralized its criticism that the President and his "puppet" IEC commissioners were scheduling an election outside the bounds of the Constitution. An uncoordinated UF response following the 2/28 decree - UF leader Burhanuddin Rabbani tried to retract party spokesman Sancharaki's public reuke of Karzai's decree - displayed confusion within the coalition. The UF's 180-degree position switch has led some Afghan media to charge UF leaders with hypocrisy and reflexively opposing Karzai for their own interests.

No Consensus Candidate

[1](#)3. (C) UF leaders have been unable to reach an agreement on their choice for a presidential candidate, despite promises as far back as last September that they were "close" to a decision (ref B). The two leading candidates are 1st Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud and former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah. According to UF executive committee members, Massoud has promised vice president positions to Pashtun royalist Mustapha Zahir and Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaqqueq, winning their quiet support. Rabbani, Massoud's

father-in-law, has give the green light to Massoud's candidacy, but has expressed some uncertainty whether Massoud's strong affiliation with Panjshiri Tajiks was the right fit given the current instability in Pashtun regions. Other UF members, particularly Marshall Fahim and Lower House Speaker Qanooni, have rejected the idea of a Massoud campaign, with Fahim seeming likely to back Karzai and Qanooni vowing to support Abdullah or re-think his decision to sit out this year's campaign. Abdullah has made a late push for the coalition's endorsement, but his long absence from Afghanistan and uncertain ties to the UF's core leadership have resulted in only tepid support thus far. Many UF members believe he would make a better candidate than Massoud, but still doubt his ability to win.

14. (C) Second-tier UF members have noted the long delay in announcing a candidate and are beginning to consider alternatives. Lower House 2nd Deputy Speaker Ammanullah Payman (Badakhshan, Tajik) told PolOff any Tajik UF candidate was sure to lose to Karzai. In order to prevent a Karzai re-election, he believed the opposition needed to rally around a Pashtun candidate not connected to the mujahideen brotherhood that forms the core of the UF. For that reason, he has decided to support a multi-ethnic slate headed by Lower House 1st Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni (Nangarhar, Pashtun). Lower House MP Qadria Yasdanparast (Kabul, Tajik), the only female member on the UF's 50-person executive committee, also said she was considering supporting Yaseni's candidacy. Yaseni has told us many of the Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek MPs who supported his election as deputy speaker would back his campaign rather than fall into line behind a candidate chosen by the UF's warlord leaders (ref C).

KABUL 00000535 002 OF 002

Karzai Peels Away Low-Hanging Fruit

15. (C) Sensing disunity among the UF's core leaders, Karzai has turned some members away from the opposition and brought them into his government. His top target has been Fahim, who served as Karzai's vice president and defense minister in the 2002-2004 transitional government. Fahim was among the first UF members to break ranks and support the IEC on the 8/20 election date and call for Karzai to stay on as president after the 5/22 constitutional expiration of his term (ref D). Fahim has strongly opposed Massoud's candidacy and assesses that any UF candidate will have a difficult time defeating Karzai. Karzai has played to Fahim's desire for a privileged spot in government (particularly one that doesn't require much work) and, according to some, offered him Massoud's 1st Vice Presidential position. Fahim has yet to commit, but widespread knowledge of the possible offer has distanced him from his UF colleagues, who now doubt his loyalty to the opposition.

16. (C) Karzai has also worked with his chief ally among mujahideen leaders, MP Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf (Kabul, Pashtun), to reach out to other UF members. Sayyaf is lobbying hard for UF executive committee member Sediq Chakari to accept Karzai's offer to appoint him to the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs. After weeks of conferring with UF members, Chakari looks ready to accept the position. Chakari told PolOff that Rabbani was unhappy with Chakari's interest in joining Karzai's government, but that other UF leaders were more understanding. After earlier supporting Massoud's candidacy, Chakari will now back Karzai unless UF leaders resolve their differences and offer a better alternative.

17. (C) The weak cohesion within the UF has kept associate UF members, such as Mohaqeq, from solidifying their alliances with the coalition. Karzai seems likely to keep 2nd Vice President Khalili, another Hazara, on his ticket, but has floated other opportunities to Mohaqeq to keep him from committing to a formal alliance with the UF. Not wanting to hurt his own standing atop Hazara politics in the event of

Karzai's re-election, Mohaqqueq has moderated his public comments on the government and refused to sign off on some UF public statements critical of Karzai.

UF's Troubles Are Karzai's Gains

18. (C) These three factors further weaken the UF's fragile two-year-old coalition. UF leaders seriously underestimated Karzai's skill as a political strategist and have fallen behind in their efforts to remove him from power. Qanooni and Rabbani probably realize they overplayed their hands in the debate over the election date and are not confident they can push Karzai aside in favor of a caretaker government after 5/22, given that they hold few cards to persuade the president to give up the advantages of incumbency. Despite plummeting popularity among elites and the general population, Karzai has kept himself in the political driver's seat and remains the favorite to win the election so long as the opposition remains divided.

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